

Isaiah 17: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Isaiah chapter 17. An oracle concerning Damascus. Behold, Damascus will cease to be a city, and will become a heap of ruins. The cities of Aroah are deserted. They will be for flocks, which will lie down, and none will make them afraid. The fortress will disappear from Ephraim, and the kingdom from Damascus, and the remnant of Syria will be like the glory of the children of Israel, declares the Lord of hosts. And in that day the glory of Jacob will be brought low, and the fat of his flesh will grow lean. And it shall be as when the reaper gathers standing grain, and his arm harvests the ears, and as when one gleanes the ears of grain in the valley of Rephaim.

Gleanings will be left in it, as when an olive tree is beaten, two or three berries in the top of the highest bough, four or five on the branches of a fruit tree, declares the Lord God of Israel. In that day man will look to his maker, and his eyes will look on the Holy One of Israel. He will not look to the altars, the work of his hands, and he will not look on what his own fingers have made, either the asherim or the altars of incense. In that day their strong cities will be like the deserted places of the wooded heights and the hilltops, which they deserted because of the children of Israel, and there will be desolation. For you have forgotten the God of your salvation, and have not remembered the rock of your refuge. Therefore though you plant pleasant plants, and sow the vine branch of a stranger, though you make them grow on the day that you plant them, and make them blossom in the morning that you sow, yet the harvest will flee away in a day of grief and incurable pain. Ah, the thunder of many peoples, they thunder like the thundering of the sea. Ah, the roar of nations, they roar like the roaring of mighty waters. The nations roar like the roaring of many waters, but he will rebuke them, and they will flee far away, chased like chaff on the mountains before the wind, and whirling dust before the storm. At evening time, behold, terror. Before morning, they are no more. This is the portion of those who loot us, and the lot of those who plunder us.

From oracles concerning Babylon, Assyria, Philistia, and Moab, the last two being the near neighbours of Judah. In Isaiah chapter 17, Syria and Israel come into view. These prophecies presumably relate to a time prior to some of the earlier ones. The prophecy concerning Philistia in chapter 14, for instance, came in the year of Ahaz's death. However, the prophecies in this chapter seem to relate to the time of the Syro-Ephraimite war. In the concluding years of the 730s BC, Syria and Israel joined together to attack the southern kingdom of Judah, hoping to remove support for Assyria to their south, they wanted to establish a secure anti-Assyrian alliance, planning to install a puppet king, the son of Tabeel, on the throne of Judah to join them. This crisis provided the backdrop for most of chapters 5 to 12 of the book of Isaiah. There the Lord called King Ahaz to trust him, promising that Pekah, the son of Remaliah of Israel, and Rezin of Syria would be cut off. Ahaz, however, turned to Assyria and ended up entangling himself in a dangerous alliance, one which moved

[3 : 1 0] Judah further in the direction of idolatry, and also played some part in precipitating the near destruction of Judah in 701 BC. The Syro-Ephraimite war was one that was devastating for the southern kingdom of Judah. In one day, for instance, as we read in 2nd Chronicles chapter 28, the forces of Pekah, the son of Remaliah of Israel, killed 120,000 of the men of Judah, their brothers. However, after the Assyrians became involved, the situation rapidly changed. In 734 BC, Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria cut off the support of Egypt to the anti-Assyrian alliance. He then attacked Israel, taking significant portions of its territory, and then later defeated Damascus in 732 BC.

In 722 BC, Samaria and the northern kingdom would fall to the forces of Shalmaneser V and his successor, Sargon II. The oracle of chapter 17 of Isaiah is introduced as one that concerns Damascus, but it is the northern kingdom of Israel that is central in much of it, especially from verse

4 onwards. Within that section, we see three in-that-day oracles that chiefly concern the nation of Israel, in verses 4-6, 7-8, and verse 9. Damascus and the Arameans, or the Syrians, are the force supporting Pica and the northern kingdom, and the pairing of Damascus and Israel is ominous. Israel is going to be judged along with the foreign nation with which it has allied itself. As John Oswald observes, Damascus was one of the most strategically located cities within the ancient world. The Lord placed the people of Israel at a juncture between different parts of the world, between Africa to the southwest, Europe to the northwest, and Asia to their east. The city of Damascus was on a key point on the pathway that would have led from Mesopotamia to Egypt, a route that would have led through the territories of Israel and Judah. The Lord declares the coming destruction of this city of Damascus. It would cease to be a city, destroyed in a siege by Shalmaneser V in 732 BC. Both of the powers to the north that had threatened Judah would be brought low and humbled. They would be stripped of their might. The fortress would disappear from Ephraim and the kingdom from Damascus. Kingdoms that had once been fat would be left thin and emaciated. Nations that were once like fields golden with grain had been thoroughly harvested, leaving only the most meagre gleanings. They are also compared to olive trees, beaten so that all but a few of the olives have been collected, those few olives remaining on the most inaccessible boughs. Some of the remnant of Israel would, however, respond in an appropriate manner to this national humiliation. They would recognize the futility of their idols. Asherah was understood as the goddess who was the consort of the god El, or alternatively of Baal, associated with cultic poles, trees, and groves. She was a goddess of fertility, and yet the remnant of Israel, because they had rejected the Lord, was experiencing not fertility but futility in their labours within the land. For all of their work in planting, their harvest was lacking. They had forgotten the god of their salvation and not remembered the rock of their refuge, the language of rock here might recall the similar language that we see in Deuteronomy chapter 32, in verses 15 to 18 of that chapter for instance. But Shashurin grew fat and kicked. You grew fat, stout, and sleek. Then he forsook God who made him, and scoffed at the rock of his salvation. They stirred him to jealousy with strange gods. With abominations they provoked him to anger. They sacrificed to demons that were no gods, to gods they had never known, to new gods that had come recently, whom your fathers had never dreaded. You were unmindful of the rock that bore you, and you forgot the god who gave you birth. Commentators debate whether the final three verses of this chapter, verses 12 to 14, should be connected primarily with the rest of chapter 17, or with verses 1 to 7 of the chapter that follows. It describes an invading force in much the same language as we see in chapter 8, verses 6 to 8. Because this people has refused the waters of Shiloah that flow gently, and rejoice over reason and the son of Remaliah. Therefore, behold, the Lord is bringing up against them the waters of the river, mighty and many, the king of Assyria and all his glory. And it will rise over all its channels, and go over all its banks, and it will sweep on into Judah. It will overflow and pass on, reaching even to the neck, and its outspread wings will fill the breadth of your land, O Emmanuel. Yet what seems to be an unstoppable force of water that's coming to deluge the land turns out to be chaff on the mountains that's blown away before the wind. A force presumed to be irresistible is quickly dissipated. The description of a vast invading force that is removed in a single night seems to match the description of what happens to Sennacherib's hoard in Isaiah chapter 37, verses 36 to 37. And the angel of the Lord went out and struck down 185,000 in the camp of the Assyrians. And when people arose early in the morning, behold, these were all dead bodies.

[8 : 18] Then Sennacherib king of Assyria departed and returned home and lived at Nineveh. A question to consider. In this chapter we see one of the earlier expressions of a theme that is very important in the book of Isaiah, the humbling of the false gods and the idols. What are some other places in the Old Testament where we see this theme expressed?